

Gary L. Fry, National Comander, AMVETS

Introduction

As the National Commander of AMVETS, it is my honor to share our concerns and comment on the issues under the purview of your committees. Since 1944, AMVETS has tirelessly served and represented more than one million servicemen and women.

The purpose and goals of AMVETS, as spelled out in the organization's 1947 Congressional Charter, still ring true today. Among these aims are:

- to preserve for ourselves and our posterity the great and basic truths and enduring principles upon which this nation was founded;
- to maintain a continuing interest in the welfare and rehabilitation of disabled veterans and to establish facilities for the assistance of all veterans, to represent them in their claims before VA and other organizations;
- to dedicate ourselves to the service and best interests of the community, state and nation to the end that our country shall be and remain forever a strong and free nation;
- to encourage universal exercise of the voting franchise to the end that there shall be elected and maintained in public office men and women who hold such office as a public trust administered in the best interests of all people; and
- to advocate the development and means by which all Americans may become enlightened and informed citizens and this participate fully in the functions of democracy.

Today, with a decade of war behind us and horrific budget cuts staring us in the face, our men and women in uniform remain steadfast in their mission to defend this great nation. During this same 10-year time span many of these brave service members paid the ultimate price for our freedom and others, at the completion of their service or due to injuries, have joined the ranks of our nation's veterans. This dedication and sacrifice must never be forgotten and the promises made to this nation's heroes must be fully and faithfully honored.

Now is the time for the Administration and Congress to step up and acknowledge all that our veterans have done for this country. We, as a nation have, through the sacrifice of our veterans and military members, incurred a solemn obligation to support them in every way possible, now and into the future. President Obama once said that the national budget would not be balanced on the backs of veterans and AMVETS adamantly supports this concept of preserving all earned veteran benefits. Our service members and veterans do not deserve to be asked to continue making sacrifices; they don't deserve excuses or broken promises, they deserve this nation's full support and nothing less. They've done the hard work on behalf of all Americans; now is the time for All Americans to relieve them of their heavy burdens.

Today's military and veteran community is faced with many challenges and AMVETS is dedicated to aggressively tackling these issues on behalf of American Veterans everywhere including:

Veteran Unemployment

Reserve Component

- Active Component
- Affirmative Action Designation

VA/DoD Health Care & Mental Health

- Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) & Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS)
- Prosthetic & Sensory Aides
- Suicide Prevention
- Extension of the VA Caregivers Compensation Program

Veterans Benefits

- Maintain Military Retirement & Health Care Benefits
- Concurrent Receipt (Active & Reserve Component)
- VA Claims & Appeals Backlog

Women Veterans & Service Members

- Military Sexual Trauma (MST)
- Creation of a Sexual Assault Oversight and Response Office
- Gender Specific Healthcare

National Guard & Reserve Service Members

- Improved USERRA Protections
- On-going Transition Between State and Federal Service
- Veteran Status

Homeless & Rural Veterans

- Provide a Full Continuum of Care for Homeless Vets (housing, employment training, legal aid, etc)
- Access to Health & Mental Health Care
- Increase Travel Reimbursement Rates

POW/MIA Recovery/Identification & Cemetery Affairs

- Improved Over Site of Mortuary Affairs Operations
- Clark Cemetery & Return the Crew of the Intrepid
- Increase Veterans Burial Benefits

Veteran Unemployment

During this time of persistent unemployment in our country, the problem of Veteran unemployment should be seen as a national disgrace and while everyone appears to be talking about the problem, few real solutions have been offered. Estimates from as recent as October 2011, suggest that the unemployment rate among American Veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan is at least 3 percent higher than the national average. In recognition of those who honorably and selflessly fought to maintain the freedoms of those who stayed behind, we as a nation cannot do enough to ensure that American Veterans get the proper skills, certifications and degrees necessary to be successful in the civilian job market.

Veteran unemployment is a complex problem which will require the efforts of federal and state governments, the business community and the military/veterans community working in concert if any real progress is to be made. The efforts of any one entity alone will be insufficient to meet the challenges posed by this massive problem facing American Veterans everywhere and it's important to keep in mind that veterans, like their civilian counterparts, require not just a job, but living-wage employment following their service. The vast majority of working-age veterans want to continue to be productive citizens and they need to be provided greater opportunities to achieve their career goals. American Veterans have made unimaginable sacrifices for our nation; now is the time for Congress and the Administration to make a concerted effort to guarantee that veterans have access to employment and training opportunities to ensure success in an unfavorable civilian job market.

AMVETS believes that perhaps the greatest and most comprehensive assistance this nation could provide for its veterans is to include them as a protected class under the current Affirmative Action law. Veterans are among the smallest minority groups in this country with fewer than 7 percent of Americans ever having served in the Armed Forces and less than one percent wearing the uniform today. While other minority groups enjoy certain protections and advantages under the law, those who have served and fought for their country currently enjoy no such comprehensive legal consideration. In fact, just the opposite is often true; frequently those who have served and sacrificed are at a disadvantage in comparison to their peers.

Additionally there needs to be a better system to connect employers with open positions to unemployed veterans; the current system of merely posting jobs online, while beneficial, just isn't enough. There are literally hundreds of online employment and career sites catering to veterans and civilians alike, which unfortunately more often than not, leave veterans confused and overwhelmed. What is needed is a comprehensive 'veteran employment resource guide' along with a single portal or site where all of these opportunities can be accessed in one place.

In addition to the previous issues, there is the very real problem of licensing and credentialing which is required in certain career fields. Due to the fact that licensing and credentialing are handled at the state level rather than the national level, many veterans who hold these designations in the states where they are stationed are faced with the need to become re-licensed/re-credentialed if they move to another state. This is an absurd requirement. If an individual is certified in one state that should be sufficient in every state; the formation on national standards for professions would alleviate this impediment to veteran unemployment. These suggestions would go a long way in minimizing the current lack of organized information and the confusion caused by the vast number of disparate resources available.

Health Care & Mental Health

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is not only the largest direct provider of healthcare services in the nation, it also provides the most extensive training environment for health professionals and is provides the most clinically focused setting for medical and prosthetic research. One of the prime responsibilities of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is providing primary care to American Veterans. The VA also provides specialized health care services including: spinal cord injury, blind rehabilitation, traumatic brain injury, prosthetic services, mental health, and war-related poly-trauma injuries. AMVETS has serious concerns

that any reduction in spending on VA healthcare programs will lead to catastrophic degradation to these critical services.

Perhaps the most important veteran healthcare issue is the need for sufficient, timely and predictable funding. Without this provision there won't be anything else. This is especially important given congress' poor track record in passing the federal budget over the last few years. AMVETS calls on Congress and the Administration to ensure that VA healthcare programs are fully funded in a timely manner so that all eligible veterans are able to receive all the medical services they are entitled to.

Unfortunately, the VA also faces significant challenges ensuring that newly returning war veterans have access to post-deployment readjustment services and specialized treatments while guaranteeing that all other enrolled veterans gain and keep access to effective, timely, high-quality mental health services. Add these challenges to the fact that ten years of war have taken a toll on the mental health of American military forces. Unfortunately, the VA also faces significant challenges ensuring that newly returning war veterans have access to post-deployment readjustment services and specialized treatments while guaranteeing that all other enrolled veterans gain and keep access to effective, timely, high-quality mental health services.

The RAND Corporation published a study in 2008 "Invisible Wounds of War" which noted that 18.4 percent of all post-deployed service members presented conditions that met criteria for either PTS or major depression and that 19.5 percent reported experiencing a probable TBI incident during their deployments. The numbers of effected veterans are significant and these are complex conditions to treat.

As previously mentioned, untreated/unhealed physical and mental health combat injuries play a significant role in the number of military/veteran suicides in this country. The data on these suicides is startling: VA reports that 18 veterans take their own lives every day which is equivalent to 6,750 veterans' suicides per year; multiply this by 10 years of war and the total number of veteran's suicides is a staggering 65,000+. And while the numbers of suicides have declined since peaking in 2009, this continues to be a grave problem deserving of our best efforts.

Veterans Benefits

AMVETS believes in the solemnity of the promises made to our military members and veterans when they agreed to leave their homes and families to go fight in our stead. In addition to providing physical and mental healthcare to millions of veterans, the VA is also the primary federal agency providing a variety of benefits to our nation's veterans including: disability compensation, dependency and indemnity compensation, pensions, retirement, education benefits, home loans, ancillary benefits for service-connected disabled veterans, life insurance and burial benefits. It is crucial, that veteran's benefits become a national priority and they must be viewed in the context of the service and sacrifice performed by our men and women in uniform. These benefit programs however must not only be maintained, they need to be monitored and improved so they maintain their value and effectiveness.

AMVETS firmly believes that all military retirees should be permitted to receive their full, earned military retirement as well as any and all VA disability compensation they may be entitled to; in other words there should be no offset between full military retired pay and VA disability compensation. Each form of compensation is individually earned, in its own right, by the veteran and other federal employees are not unjustly penalized this same way when an identical situation. AMVETS strongly urges Congress and the Administration to enact legislation to repeal this inequity faced by so many American Veterans.

Women Veterans and Service Members

Every woman who ever served in the military in America did so as a volunteer! Their history of service to this country is long and proud even though their service prior to the Civil War was strictly unofficial; they have been involved in every battle, one way or another, going back to the Revolutionary War. Today, women comprise between 17% – 20% of the U.S. military and they are fully integrated into the combat zones around the world.

Among the most critical issues facing women veterans today are: homelessness, military sexual trauma (MST), employment and the lack of gender specific health care. These three issues are the trifecta of degradation and deprivation for women veterans. They are also somewhat of a 'Catch-22' in that each issue overlaps and effects the other two, making it that much more difficult to escape this negative cycle. How can we as a nation allow some of our most vulnerable veterans, many of whom also have children, to be living on the streets of our cities? Why is it that a woman should have to fear for her personal safety, not only from foreign enemies, but from her comrades-in-arms simply because she made a conscious decision to serve in the military? All veterans, by their very service to their country, should be guaranteed some basics: shelter, any necessary physical and mental health care, food, job training or education, and an opportunity to support themselves and their children upon exiting the military.

Some of these veterans are already victims of MST and PTS while on active duty and now they are faced with the dangers and lack of appropriate physical and mental health care inherent in being homeless. These veterans are often unable to locate temporary housing at local homeless shelters because many of these facilities are not set up to house to accommodate the specific safety and privacy needs of women, not to mention their children. It's a sad fact that homeless individuals are not infrequently involved in the criminal justice system for a variety of offences, including crimes against women and children. This situation is truly a national disgrace and must not be allowed to continue.

A new report from the Government Accountability Office shows that the number of homeless women veterans doubled between 2006 and 2010, with 3,328 women veterans unable to access shelter. Of these women, "almost two-thirds were between 40 and 59 years old and over one-third had disabilities." The numbers are not encouraging and they are expected to get worse. With tens of thousands of troops leaving military service and more slated over the next year, for women veterans with families, it's especially difficult to find work and housing. As of December 2011, The Veterans Administration estimated that of the roughly 68,000 homeless veterans, more than 5,000 were women. To combat the problem, the VA is training many of its 7,000 case managers to deal with issues specific to women.

National Guard & Reserve Service Members

AMVETS fully supports H.R. 1025, Veterans Status, for National Guard and Reserve members with 20 years or more in service. This cost neutral bill would not bestow any new or unearned benefits, it would simply provide career Reserve Component (RC) members the honor of being recognized as a Veteran for their many years of service and sacrifice. This bill would also provide an opportunity for Congress and the Administration to show their support for America's military retirees.

What is a military retiree? A military retiree is what a National Guard or Reserve Component member, who has completed a 20(+) year career, is designated upon retirement. If these individuals have never served on active duty (Title 10) orders for other than training purposes they are not legally considered veterans. Mind you, they are entitled to virtually all the same retirement benefits as their Active Component brethren, but they are not considered veterans under the law. This unjust situation is not widely known among members of Congress or even among members of the RC themselves.

H.R.1025 would authorize Veteran status under Title 38 for National Guard and Reserve members of the Armed Forces who are entitled to a non-regular retirement under Chapter 1223 of 10 USC but were never called to active federal service during their careers – through no fault of their own. As an example, the service of our National Guard members now serving on Operation Noble Eagle on our Southwestern border on Title 32 orders would not qualify them to earn the status of “Veterans of our Armed Forces” because it is technically a “training” status.

Currently, the Code of Veterans' Benefits, Title 38, excludes from the definition of “Veteran” career Reservists who have not served on Title 10 active duty for other than training purposes. Drill training, annual training, active duty for training, and Title 32 duty are not qualifying service to qualify for “Veteran” status. It doesn't make sense that an individual can serve three years on active duty, during a time of war or not and upon leaving the military they are considered a veteran; however, a National Guard or Reserve member who has 20(+) years of service but has not called to federal service is not considered a veteran – although they receive similar benefits.

Homeless Veterans

As the House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees undertake the important work of establishing their budget priorities for the VA, AMVETS urges the committees to consider the importance of supportive housing facilities for homeless veterans, many of which are situated on VA property and/or owned and operated by the VA. Consistent with Secretary Shinseki's goal of eliminating homelessness among veterans by the year 2015, these facilities are vital to the scores of homeless veterans – including those from Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom – that rely upon them for shelter, health care, and other services.

AMVETS appreciates the support that the committees have shown for programs to mitigate the scourge of homelessness among veterans. We are also grateful for the \$333 million that Secretary Shinseki has proposed for homeless veterans in the FY 2013 budget request, a one-third increase in funding from FY 2012. We strongly support the Secretary's goal of eliminating

homelessness among veterans by 2015. The VA's "housing first" approach – which has largely been carried out via a combination of increases in HUD-VASH vouchers, enhanced funding for the grant and per diem program, and support for outreach coordinators – has allowed the VA to make important progress toward its goal of eliminating veterans' homelessness.

Even as this progress continues, AMVETS encourages the committees and the VA to prioritize the construction or repurposing of facilities on VA property to be used for supportive housing for homeless veterans. The shortage of such housing is particularly acute in the Los Angeles region, where approximately 8,000-10,000 veterans remain homeless. This represents an approximate 10 percent share of all homeless veterans nationwide. Remediating the homeless veterans' problem in Los Angeles is essential to meeting Secretary Shinseki's goal of elimination.

Congress has repeatedly supported using vacant facilities on the West Los Angeles VA Medical Center campus for homeless veterans' housing and has resisted efforts to commercialize this valuable plot of property. The Cranston Act, as amended, prohibits the VA from issuing enhanced-use lease agreements on all 388 acres of the campus. The Homeless Veterans Comprehensive Service Programs Act of 1992 permits the VA to lease property to homeless organizations on the campus. In the Master Plan for the West L.A. campus adopted last year, at least three buildings – Buildings 205, 208, and 209 – are identified as possible residential facilities for homeless veterans.

In the Veterans Health Care Facilities Capital Improvement Act of 2011, Congress – under the leadership of Chairmen Murray and Miller – authorized \$35 million in funding for VA to renovate Building 209 for use as a permanent supportive housing facility for homeless veterans. The completion of this renovation, which will provide 70-90 beds for homeless veterans when operational, will increase the supply of housing for Los Angeles's homeless veteran's population. This funding was an essential first step, but only a first step. Authorization and funding for renovations to Buildings 205 and 208 is needed to transform those vacant buildings into supportive housing facilities for homeless veterans. Once Buildings 205, 208, and 209 are completed, the VA will have made significant progress toward the reduction of homelessness among veterans in Los Angeles by giving hundreds of homeless veterans a safe and secure place to reside while receiving the vital health treatment that they need.

Mortuary Affairs

AMVETS is deeply disturbed by on-going reports of the mishandling of the remains of our fallen heroes. There is no more sacred responsibility than the dignified and respectful recovery, return and burial of those killed in action. While AMVETS acknowledges that many positive improvements have recently been established, more needs to be done to ensure these events don't happen in the future. AMVETS recommends continued and increased oversight of all mortuary operations facilities.